

Catherine A. Vanicky

612 Huntington Road, Stratford, CT 06614 203-378-5984

Director, Honey Bear Learning Center, 1498 North Ave., Stratford, CT 06614

HoneyBear.Office@att.net 203-375-1866

March 6, 2019 Testimony Regarding:

- S.B. No. 931 An Act Concerning Payments To Child Care Providers
- S.B. No. 932 An Act Concerning The Staff Qualifications Requirement For Early Childhood Educators
- S.B. No. 933 An Act Expanding Eligibility For Certain Families In The Care4Kids Program
- S.B. No. 934 An Act Expanding Eligibility In The Care4Kids Program To Parents Enrolled In Other Types of School
- S.B. No. 935 An Act Requiring The Office Of Early Childhood To Develop An Early Childhood Educator Compensation Schedule
- S.B. No. 937 An Act Concerning A Student Loan Forgiveness Program For Early Childhood Educators

Dear Honorable Legislatures for the Great State of Connecticut,

I'd like to start with a question. Why are the ones who educate the little ones who turn into the big ones that eventually run our government and businesses – why are they NOT looked upon as professionals? We teach our youngest Connecticut citizen's, we give them a strong educational foundation which assists them to graduate high school, graduate college and become voting members who contribute to our community. We need public value for our Early Childhood Educators! They need to be paid in a manner that reflects their important public value, their skill, and their competency.

**I TEACH! What's your superpower?**

I am the proud owner and Director of Honey Bear Learning Center. My family has been serving our community since 1986. Since 1988, our program has continually been nationally accredited by the National Education for Young Children, (NAEYC), and a CT School Readiness Program, serving Bridgeport families since 1997. I am a voting member of; the CT Early Childhood Alliance serving as the liaison for the Bridgeport School Readiness Council, Bridgeport School Readiness Providers Network, Stratford School Readiness Executive Committee and the Stratford School Readiness and Child Care Advisory Council. We serve 16 infants and toddlers and 36 preschool children and families. Honey Bear employs nine full time and one part time teaching staff along with a full time office assistant. To keep costs down, as an unpaid second job, my husband performs the maintenance of our buildings and grounds.

My program is being squeezed and my staff are struggling! Care4Kids (C4K) payment rates last increase was a 3% in 2002 and School Readiness Program last had a 3% increase in 2014. Without any funding increases, I'm not able to give raises and offer additional benefits such as health insurance and a 401K to my under-paid and dedicated teaching staff, who struggle as they live paycheck-to paycheck. I have difficulties hiring qualified teaching staff who have an Early Childhood Bachelor's degree to meet the State required credentialing mandates as I can't afford their desired wage. The ones I can afford, aren't degreed, I assist them with registering for college and then mentor them through graduation. But, the toughest part of this process is retaining our educated and now skilled teachers who we lose to the public school system. Who can blame them, higher wages, better benefits and summers off.

The current mandated (excessive) educational requirements for early childhood teachers (in School Readiness Programs, we call this sort of thing and so many others, "An UNFUNDED mandate"), in a state-funded classroom, does NOT coincide with our current teachers wages. In my mind, if you require an individual to obtain a Bachelor's degree in their field (Early Childhood) then you must consider them a professional and pay them a fair wage.

The children lose if we can't retain teachers. Fairly compensated teachers make emotionally invested and successful teachers, who invest in their students and their classrooms, and who support optimal child development. The child (and family) relies on the teacher to provide a positive and loving classroom and offer developmentally appropriate classroom experiences.

A major concern of mine and my colleague Directors is that we are already financially squeezed. We can't afford to give profession worthy raises. And then, minimum wage gets raised to \$15.00. This challenge will devastate the childcare industry as programs will close, teachers will lose their employment, and classrooms will be even more financially impacted. For programs that solely rely on family fees, to survive, they will need to raise tuition rates and pass it on to the family making childcare unaffordable in CT for all but the wealthiest. For State Funded Child Care such as; School Readiness and Child Development Centers, a funding increase CANNOT be passed along; we are mandated to follow the approved sliding fee scale for family fees.

I support a livable minimum wage for all CT residents, especially for our early childhood educators. I'm not a 100% positive this will entirely eliminate a program's deficit bottom line, but I feel to start, a valuable solution is to increase C4K rates, paying the federally recommended rate (which would bring CT to 75<sup>th</sup> percentile of childcare market rate) AND increasing School Readiness and State-Funded Center Programs funding. This will be beneficial for children, families, early childhood professionals, programs and the community.

When C4K shut down open enrollment in late 2016, it majorly reduced my C4K funding. In order to meet my budget, I had to secure a \$25,000 loan and take on \$15,000 credit card debt. Debt that I am still currently paying off.

Along with my submitted testimony is a spread sheet that outlines how raising the minimum wage to \$15.00 will impact my program. ALL of my teachers will require raises. Some to be at \$15.00 and ALL others will receive a proportional increase, relative to their current salary structure in the program. WITHOUT additional state funding, my programs total annual expenses will be increased by \$72,000. I don't have that money. To turn the old expression into preschool language, "You can't get water from a Dr. Seuss book!" I would have to reduce expenses even further, lay off staff, increase my full-pay tuition

and possibly terminate my School Readiness contract. NONE, of which I want to do! Therefore, I am in favor of SB 931, 932, and 935.

In brain storming with my Bridgeport School Readiness Liaison, Lee Helmerich, we offer a suggestion to SB 937, Loan Forgiveness for Early Childhood Educators. We can recruit High School seniors to obtain their Associates/Bachelor's degrees, work in a state approved early childhood program and offer them loan forgiveness. In essence, we can "grow our own" – skilled and educated preschool teachers.

In polling Bridgeport School Readiness Program staff, they are in dire need of private health insurance. It would be cost efficient to pool health insurance for CT early childhood educators.

The Office of Early Childhood is developing a Quality Improvement System, a rating scale. My suggestion for programs and providers that are not NAEYC accredited, to assimilate and State verification being a high quality program, is to have additional OEC licensing regulations.

Those who are not in early childhood don't understand our profession. We hear so frequently, "Why are you so tired, ALL you did today was play with the kids." Did they know that teacher who "played" all day has her Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood and has 10+ years' experience? I challenge any of you who would like to take a teachers place in our preschool for the day. No, I'll be easy on you, let's say 2 hours. (Just like government officials and legislatures take a "drive-along" with police officers to shadow and understand a bit of the profession.) I am sincerely opening up this invitation.

If you heard my testimony at the March 6, 2019 Education Committee Public Hearing, I spoke of how we positively teach our preschool children. We proclaim the phrase, "Happy Choices" any time we observe the children making positive experiences and choices and having positive interactions with their peers. If you vote to pass these Senate Bills, I personally will give you a Happy Choice Stamp on your hand!! But, for now, this one will have to do....



Please help me, to help my help staff, and to help our youngest Connecticut children learn how to make happy choices now and when they are grown and occupy your seat in the CT Legislature. If we take care of TODAY, tomorrow will come. Warm regards, Catherine A. Vanicky

